THE GREAT ABYSS? INTERNATIONAL MORAL DILEMMAS AND REASONING DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ENTREPRENEURS AND THE NONBUSINESS PUBLIC (INTERACTIVE PAPER)

Nancy L. Bodie
Boise State University, USA, dbodie@boisestate.edu
INTERACTIVE PAPER

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Principal Topic

Most studies about ethical decision making in the international arena come from the lens of the large multinational corporation. Little research attention has been focused on entrepreneurs’ ethics in international situations. This paper studies the following questions: 1) How do entrepreneurs reason when faced with international ethical and cultural dilemmas? and 2) What differences exist in the reasoning patterns of entrepreneurs as compared to nonbusiness adults in the general population?

The conceptual framework used in this study is Turiel’s social cognitive domain theory, which distinguishes among the individual’s concepts of cultural conventions, morality, and issues of personal discretion. In generating business decisions, international entrepreneurs weigh and negotiate the competing dimensions of conventional norms and customary ways of doing business with their own notions of what is objectively moral.

Method

This study used a mixed-model research agenda including 1) in-depth semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurs and nonbusiness participants; and 2) a survey measuring importance ratings of factors employed in rendering social and moral judgments in five vignettes.

Results and Implications

Findings suggest that entrepreneurs reason about moral and social issues in essentially the same way as do comparison adults in the general population when considering general ethical (nonbusiness) dilemmas. For these two dilemmas, the responses for both groups were essentially alike and dominated by moral domain reasoning. In the business vignettes, both groups reasoned using conventional and mixed domain reasoning patterns, and shifted their priorities when dealing in the business context. One nonbusiness participant’s reflection seems representative of the public’s general tone about business: “Purely in my opinion, nothing dams you in this country so completely as success in business.” While it is unlikely that the similarity of the entrepreneurs’ and nonbusiness participants’ reasoning will dispel the notion that businesspeople are self-serving and unethical, the implications of this study and its multi-method approach, may provide richer understanding of the cognitive processes underlying entrepreneurs’ decisions and may lend insight into the complex and conflicting moral and social problems entrepreneurs face in the global marketplace. The similar reasoning patterns may have positive implications for softening the negative perception of business leaders as being “irresponsible stewards of other people’s money and trust.”

CONTACT: Nancy (Dusty) Bodie; dbodie@boisestate.edu; (T): 1-208-426-3393; (F): 1-208-426-1857; Boise State University 1910 University Drive Boise, ID 83725-1625.